

The Meth Connection to Mental Illness

The methamphetamine epidemic in our country began in the West and is moving east, and having a devastating effect. The increasingly widespread production, distribution and use of this drug are now affecting urban, rural and suburban communities nationwide. County governments across America are on the front lines in responding to this crisis.

For these counties, meth abuse causes legal, medical, environmental and social problems. County governments and their citizens must pay for investigating and closing meth labs (which are hazardous waste sites), making arrests, holding lawbreakers in detention centers and then trying them, providing indigent defense if necessary, and then providing treatment for addiction as well as other serious medical consequences.

There are also many social effects that must be dealt with. In an alarming number of meth arrests, there is a child living in the home. These children many times suffer from neglect and abuse. The labs are a danger to the community, with their highly flammable and explosive compounds. Additionally, for every pound of meth produced, five to seven pounds of toxic waste remain, which is often released into the environment through drains or surface water run-off.

While the meth epidemic is a complex and growing problem, nowhere in Maricopa County has its impact been felt more severely than in our jails. There are over 9,200 inmates in our jail system and the population continues to accelerate at an alarming rate.

While our Commission of Justice System Intervention for the Seriously Mentally Ill has been working to divert the mentally ill out of our jails, we have discovered there is a connection between the meth epidemic and mental illness.

Here are a few facts:

- ° 95% of our inmate population is in jail directly or indirectly as a result of their drug or alcohol use.
- ° About 25% of our inmates are receiving psychotropic drugs prescribed by our correctional health doctors to treat the symptoms of mental illness. Cost to the taxpayers last year - - over \$5 million.
- ° Methamphetamine poses much different physical, emotional and mental effects on its users than Cocaine, Heroin, Marijuana and most illegal drugs. While coming down from the "high" created by the use of meth is easier in many ways than these other addictive drugs, meth drains its users to the point of total physical and emotional collapse. It creates severe depression and paranoia and very often near-permanent mental illness, which then must be treated with anti-depressants and behavioral therapies in order to restore the balance of healthy cognitive skills required to function in society.

We now realize our growing jail population may indeed be a result of the explosion of methamphetamine use. With tax monies, we are funding the prescribed drugs and counseling to treat meth-addicted inmates who must deal with the consequent symptoms of mental illness.

We continue to seek better programs and solutions to these difficult problems. We need to sound the alarm to our youth and to every potential meth user in our community. For further information and research on the subject, contact:

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